



Research Paper

Mahima Dharma and Social Reconstruction

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Abstract: *It can be asked what makes the Indian cultural and intellectual tradition distinct from the other tradition. It can be said without hesitation that it is its berth in some or other form of metaphysical theory. Be it science, history, religion and morality- at its base lay a conviction in certain metaphysical principle. When it comes to the issue of social reconstruction, the whole discourse refers the same. This article takes up the genesis of Mahima Dharma is not rooted in a social theory but it is predominantly a socio-religious system. Unlike others Mahima Dharma is not confined to the observances of practices and prohibitions rather it aims at bringing value-transformation in the collective body of society. It contributed to the broader efforts of social reconstruction by promoting unity, social equality and cultural revival. Moreover, it is an attempt to reform the traditional religions of their irreligious components. Though Mahima Dharma is very much a part of the Indian religio-philosophical tradition, boldly defies social discrimination, meaningless rites based on varna and dharma/jati. So the first part of the article would like to explicate the metaphysical structure of Mahima Dharma and the second part would make an attempt to show how closely the social and spiritual dimensions of the way of thought is related.*

Keywords: *Mahimā dharma, SunyaBrahman, alekha, spirituality, sanatan dharma, humanity.*

It can be asked what makes the Indian cultural and intellectual tradition distinct from the other tradition. It can be said without hesitation that it is its berth in some or other form of metaphysical theory. Be it science, history, religion and morality- at its base lay a conviction in certain metaphysical principle. When it comes to the issue of social reconstruction, the whole discourse refers the same. This work takes up the genesis of Mahima Dharma, which is not rooted in a social theory but it is predominantly a socio-religious movement emphasizes an alternative metaphysical scheme that offered to a large section of people the path to true spirituality. Unlike others, Mahima Dharma is not confined to the observances of practices and prohibitions rather it aims at bringing value-transformation in the collective body of society that is, truth, non-violence and simplicity. Which has a significant impact on contemporary society in several ways. It is the fact that, a new form of life that is very in consonance with the general structure of their metaphysics. So the first part of the discussion is to explicate the metaphysical structure of Mahima Dharma and the second part of the discussion is to make an attempt to show how closely the social and spiritual dimensions of this way of thought is related.

Mahima dharma is not a dharma in the ordinary sense of the term. Infact, though in modern India we hold the words dharma and religion as synonymous. But dharma is a term with much wider connotation. Dharma, though has several meanings and definitions, the predominantly admitted meaning has unique social orientation that totally is lacking in the world religion. The most popular definition of the term are- dharayati it dharma- that which holds the society/mankind together is dharma. The definition indirectly refers to the human virtues like truth, non-violence, self-control etc. that makes the human society a harmonious whole. So these virtues are also called dharma (for example, ahimsa parama dharma). Again, dharma also has been defined as dharana dharma uccyate- that lifts to society or mankind from degeneration is dharma. Thus when we are using the word dharma in case of Mahima system of belief we must keep in mind that it is one of the very few systems of belief in the post-puranic phase that sticks to the spirit of the dharma in the true sense of the term. Here there is no promise of heaven, no idol to be propitiated, no rituals to make man worthy for the mukti. Thus Mahima dharma in its tenet and spirit is almost unparalleled in the history of Indian spiritualism. The only parallel may be Buddhism. Mahima Dharma's rejection of idolatry, non-ritualistic approach, emphasis on equality and humanitarian values, philosophical foundation, ascetic lifestyle, and focus on community welfare make it distinct from conventional dharmas. It is more of a spiritual and ethical movement aimed at personal and social transformation.

Before examine the metaphysical basis of this unique dharma let us state in brief the historical facts that created the ground for the propagation and nurturing of its high ideals as well as an apparently abstruse metaphysics. We must note that Mahima philosophy is very much unlike the philosophical systems in India. In

such system of thought there exists a gap however thin between speculative philosophical theories and the level of practice. Such philosophical/metaphysical systems were developed more or less for academic and intellectual purposes rather than percolating them down to the level of practice. Moreover, Mahimapreaches a system of non-dualism in which the highest reality, though subject of prayer and bhakti, is ineffable, non-nameable (anama), non-describable (avyakta and alekha), form-less (arupa) non-categorizable (nirguna) in nature. A peep into the history of Indian cultural tradition reveals that such a form of non-dualism has never found popularity among the common people. So, Upanishadic non-dualism lost its place to puranic conception dualistic theism. Similarly, the Buddhist theory of sunyavada was replaced by Tantric Buddhism. It is very difficult even for an elite, forget about the common people, to translate the non-dualistic philosophy into practice. Even Sankaracharya, who championed the non-dualistic Brahnavada, never was tired of composing hymns for the personal Gods and Goddesses. So it sometimes appear perplexing how the people from the downtrodden section of Odisha very happily absorbed a system of philosophy that neither believes in a personal God, nor prescribes rites and rituals so very common in the post-puranic ages.

Mahima dharma rose like a phoenix in the second half of the 19th century. During that phase the land witnessed the worst form of Hindu rigidity. The entire jagannatha dharma that symbolized a wonderful syncretism of diverse religious sentiments and also stood for a unique sort of openness turned in to the preserve of the royalty and the high caste Brahmins. There was a sudden reversal towards unprecedented religious orthodoxy. This attitude might have resulted from sense of insecurity evoked by the establishment of the first Christian mission sometime in 1826. Whatever might be the cause of such religious rigidity, the fact remains that the door of the jagannatha temple was closed for the people of the lower strata of the society. Thus for the long section of the society jagannatha became an exclusive and distant Lord. The second important factor that acted as a catalyst for a changed religious attitude of the downtrodden was the great famine of Odisha, famously known as 'NaankaDurbhiksa', sometimes in 1966. The poor people virtually starved and one third of them were wiped away. But what added to their humiliation was the attitude of the society at large regarding the observance of the norms of the caste. These people were ostracized as chatrakhiyas for partaking the cooked food in the relief camps (chatra) organised by the colonial administration. These hapless people were treated as social out-caste. So a sense of severe resentment was brewing among the within a section of the society. All such factors created a psyche that proved fertile for a new form of life that could at least guarantee such downtrodden and oppressed people a place under the sun. This was the period when MahimaSvami appeared on the scene as the redeemer of the hopeless. He preached a new of looking at God as well as the life as a whole.

Here I present in brief the metaphysical scheme Mahima Dharma that may help us to understand the link between the theory and its manifestation in the level of social reconstruction. MahimaSvami's message was clear and simple. There is but one reality/God who has been addressed in the Mahima literature as Sunya-Brahman, Alekha and Mahima. This Reality transcends all categories of conceptualisation and thought. This it is described with such negative predicates as alekha, arupa, adrsya, anaksara, avykta, anama, nirvikara, nirvikalpa. The only positive predicate applied to this ultimate reality is Mahima implying the glorious and powerful one. From this presupposition it follows that the God cannot be caught within the frame of a form or idol. Such a God does not need rituals, offerings any pomp or show for his propitiation. Even it challenged the supremacy of jagannatha (who by that time was treated as an exclusive property of the higher caste) by portraying as the first disciple of MahimaSvami. Thus the system of thought and practice offered a ray of solace to the oppressed class who badly needed a social and religious anchor. The AlekhaSunya Brahma- the highest reality-for them is nothing but a subjective consciousness. Yet this principle can be realized in life through the path of sadhana and ultimately culminates in jnana-bhakti yoga. One has to prepare personally for the path through moral perfection. Therefore, Mahima dharma speaks of morality at two levels- individual and social. Though the reality is conceived as ineffable yet it is not just an abstract metaphysical principle. His presence is manifest in the whole creation as the visible universe is the manifestation of the Sunya Brahma. He is all-pervading (bibhu). As non-compromising non-dualist Mahima dharma holds that there is no distinction between the animate and inanimate; between the man and the man; and between the universal self (Brahman) and the individual self (jivatman). So serving God means service to the humanity. God being all-pervasive each human being partakes of the divinity. So logically it follows that there should be no discrimination in the human society on the basis of caste and creed, pure and polluted, rich and poor.

The only path suggested for approaching such a God is unconditional bhakti. But a man could be fit for bhakti only through the path of the purity of the heart and truthfulness. The path to divine grace is through morality. Mahima dharma offered a theory of philosophy that may not at first sight may appear very unique. The non-dualistic metaphysics is regarded as the hall-mark of the Upanishads that was later systematized by Sankaracharya. He too offered a scheme of metaphysics centered on the concept of the uniqueness of the Brahma. He too described this reality as nirguna, nirvisesa, anirvacaniya, nirvikalpa, nirakara, who under no circumstances could be taken as a worshippable personal God (Isvara). Brahma too is regarded by him as the ground of the phenomenal world. But when it came to the level of practice it appeared too abstract and abstruse

for a common man to follow. Moreover, there was virtually no attempt by Sankaracharya to translate his metaphysical theory into action. He seems to confine his philosophy within the framework of dialectic without giving much importance to the logical consequences that could have impacted the society. In the level of practice he staunchly held into the varna-vyavastha and rituals like pancayatana puja. Again, Buddhism, especially, Sunyavada came up with a similar theory of the reality. The ultimate reality is now called sunyata, that defied all the conceptual categories. But there is no record to show that Nagarjuna intended to translate his metaphysical position into practice. The Vaisnava of Odisha, too tried to push forth a theory of non-dualistic reality that was called interestingly as the Sunya-Brahman, yet they could not altogether discard the place of Jagannatha as a personal deity. So we notice the Mahimadhrama displays a rare kind of guts to amalgamate theory and practice, metaphysics and social facts, religion and morality that finally led to a form of social construction.

The Spiritual and Social Ideals of Mahima Dharma:

Mahimadhrama primarily aims at searching the infinite that dwells in every finite being. The Sunya Brahman or Alekha is the indwelling spirit in every being. Brahman being ineffable can be understood in no other form other than the spiritual experience. Such spiritual experience needs a perception in two levels-individual and social. In the individual level one has to attain the moral purity. So BhimaBhoi warns that, 'This is not the dharma of the sadhu or mahanta. This is much different from that. This is not a form of sadhana meant for the show or pomposity. Such bhakti is not enough for attaining the Brahman.' (StutiChintamani, 83)

The above lines reveal much more than what they state. Bhakti in the Indian orthodox tradition for centuries had stood for nothing more than a bundle of rites and rituals; a means of propitiating the God; a path to heaven. Thus the lofty ideals by the word bhakti were replaced by a set of beliefs that came with a baggage of hypocrisy, opportunism, methods social oppression.

Since MahimaSvami, the founder of Mahima dharma had no written work I would concentrate on the works of BhimaBhoi, the genius who was commanded by MahimaSvami to preach the new dharma through his lyrical poems and bhajans. Though his aim was not to expound a philosophical system but to reach to the heart of the people through simple lyric, yet it is not very difficult to glean the basics Mahima dharma from his works. However dharma and bhakti is not confined to individual morality. As I have stated earlier Mahimadhrama drew the whole-hearted support from a large section of the society in the name of sanatanadhrama, that champions social disparity. From the works of BhimaBhoi we get a broad picture of the then society.

So a perfect social morality is as important for this dharma as the moral perfection in the individual level. Without a harmonious society the perfection in the individual life is not possible. The historical compulsion of the genesis of Mahima dharma finds expression in its concern for the society. Excepting Buddhism no other form of traditional dharma showed such a great amount of concern for the causes of degradation as well as the uplift of the society. It is no wonder in Mahima congregation they never pray for the selfish goals but for the redemption and the well-being of the whole. There are perhaps very few examples of a dharma in practice that holds the well-being of the world as the primary concern. BhimaBhoi being a child of the times felt its pangs more deeply than any other follower and scholar of Mahima dharma. He was directly initiated by MahimaSvami and was commanded by him to preach the essence of Mahima dharma through the lyrical bhajans and poetical compositions. This is why we find that he pours out his heart in his poems to record the plight of the –then society. He not only mechanically narrated his state of affairs he also felt that unless the society is morally salvage the true Mahima dharma cannot be established. From his writings one can easily feel the pain of the down-trodden in the society. His concern about the moral degeneration does not come forth only as a preacher of Mahima dharma, his concern transcended such narrow confines. He was rather talking as true humanist.

The chief motivation that stands in and throughout BhimaBhoi's writings in his utter concern and empathy for the fellowmen and his fervent zeal to help them come out of the state of decadence and suffering.

The famous text Brahma Nirupana Gita by BhimaBhoi delineates the nature and characteristics of the Brahman. It is in the form of a dialogue between Gurudeba and Nirakara, First Nirakara asks questions about Brahma. In response, Gurudeba describes Brahma and his features, he says that

'Stiripurushasethareantisamana
Guru shishyankarasethinahibhinnabhinna.' (Bhoi, Stuti 6/58)

Trans: Men and women are equal there
There is no discrimination between the teacher and the student

‘Men and women
They all behave in a wanton way.
No one cares for the virtue or sin,
No one bothers for his repute.
On the wide earth
No one is chaste.
No one has control over the passion of flesh.
Each one is an adulterer or adulteress.
Where shall I go?
Sin is pervasive
And I dwell on dharma
People long for pace of heart
But refrain from their requisite karma,
How will they pass their days?
Such nitwits are the lot,
They stray into the
Dark woods of maya.’

He argues that it is astounding about BhimaBhoi’s conception of equality among human beings in his distinct attitude towards women. Right from Dharmasastra and puranas to the compositions in vernacular language women are always given a secondary status. BhimaBhoi sees no real ground for the discrimination between men and women. There are instances in his works that suggest for the dignity and respect of all individuals, regardless of their gender. Though his writings donot explicitly delve deeply into gender relations or the role of women in society rather his emphasis on the inherent worth of every soul and his critique of societal inequalities would imply a compassionate attitude towards women.

In the broader context of the time, when women were often relegated to subjugated roles in many parts of Indian society, BhimaBhoi’s teachings, like those of many Bhakti saints, would have offered an alternative, emphasizing equality and spiritual liberation for all, irrespective of gender. His belief in the equality of souls before the divine likely extended to a more progressive view of women’s dignity, through direct references to women’s roles or rights. BhimaBhoi’s spiritual and social ideals, which rejected caste discrimination and valued inner purity over external rituals, suggest an attitude that would have respected women as equal participants in the spiritual and social life of society.

There seems to be no hope for the society. It is not very difficult to glean from BhimaBhoi’s works, what in his estimation were the causes of the social maladies. First and foremost the attitude of the people towards dharma that their thought could redeem the human beings from the worldly suffering people; Second, the deeply entrenched belief in social hierarchy. He narrates from his own experience how his ardent appeal to see the futility of blindly following the equally blind dogmas of so-called Hindu dharma were scoffed at. He feels desperate when people proudly stick to blind rituals and worship of innumerable gods and goddesses without realizing that the Brahman is but one and unique. The way society at that point of time was blindly driven in religious mumbo jumbo makes him vocal against idol worship and religious institutions thriving on it. He argues that the idols are inert and lifeless made up of the pancamahabhutas. It is the height of ignorance to make worldly offerings to God with the hope of redemption. So he says,

They are but idols,
With no jivatman.
How can they grant boon to you? (StutiChintamani, 95)

Again, he does not find any rationale behind the practice of going to pilgrimage. He staunchly believed that God does not exist in any particular place. So every place is a holy place. BhimaBhoi believes that since the human body itself is the seat of God one need not go on long pilgrimages. One need not go to temples to find him. One has to just turn within. God can be served not by sacramental offerings, by rites and rituals in the temple but by serving the God’s creation, for, the God is manifested in everything and being. A true dharma should help people to expand their vision wherein they realize the God in His essential nature. So he says

Without knowing the essence of God
You roam all around
For the sake of tirtha and vrata.
If you think deeply,
Then you can see Brahman,
Wherever you want Him. (StutiChintamani, 92.)

(Na janicharidigarepheruachha/tirthabratakari/jahinrelodibaachanti brahma/bujhibajbebichari//)

BhimaBhoi was painfully aware of the fact that such religious conviction has no meaning if it does not help one to share the weal and woe one's fellowmen. Therefore, the so-called places of worship have become the place of exploitation for the simple and poor. This is one of the reason why at several places he declares that Jagannatha no longer resides in his temple; and He has come out to preach the religion of Mahima. Sometimes he gets so frustrated with the attitude of the people who had no concern about the plight of the society that he gives vent to his anger and impatience in the following words,

'In these sinful years of kali
The world grows vicious
Day by Day.
Their unjust customs,
And vile traditions
Will drag men to doom.

For me the entire world
With nine continents all,
Is no more than a plate of clay.
To me the whole creation,
With its fifty six crores of living beings,
Looks no better than a piece of straw.
In a single day,
I can destroy
The wicked world.
Yet how can I?
I do not have the permission of the revered guru' (StutiChintamani, 26)

BhimBhoi very logically argues that if God resides in everything manifested in the world how could there be any discrimination between the high and the low?

'God resides in the abode of alekha
Where nobody is higher none lower' (StutiChintamani. 7)

Again,
'We are the higher castes'
Thus they vent their shallow arrogance.
Go and search all over the world,
You will find there is but one jati (caste)
So he entreats,
'May you never discriminate between
A brahmana and chandal
'May you never bother about jati and gotra
May you never
Conform to the order
Of high and low' (StutiChintamani, 85)

Brahma mahanyabasisarbeekajati
Ahimsa Bhubanatahinnathaiaraasthi.(6/59)

Trans: All the dwellers in the bramaloka are the same
There is no quarrel among them as it is the abode of non-violence

In chapter seven Nirakara asks him how to worship Brahma. He explains him how to worship him through the Mahima Nama or thorough the name of the glory of God:

He stressed on the spiritual attributes of Shanta, ShilaDaya, Kshyama:

Mahimagarbharujatahelachari dharma

Shantashiladayakshamaboliankanama. (7/60)

Trans: Four dharmas emerge from the womb of Mahima

They are shanta,shila, daya and kshama.

Again he writes,

When it comes to Brahman-bhakti there is no scope for inequality

Whoever entertains such thought would be in the hell. (Brhma-Nirupana Gita, 103)

BhimaBhoi's conviction about the need for social equality has its roots not only at a conceptual level, it was instigated by the practical experience of his times. He writes

‘JadiichhatahinparihasakariBhimaBhoikandhaboli

Padadhuaajalapeeailabolisarbedeuchantigaali’(StutiChintamani, 8. 62ndBoli)

In StutiChintamani, the poet prays O

Lord how long should I suffer? I have been ill-treated by people. Wherever I go, I face condemnation. People call me by caste and say that I am a Kandha. I bear the condemnation on my shoulders as showers of rain. When I tell them to follow the Truth to come out of this, they insult me, when I talk about your glory, they thrash me and say kick him out saying, let us see how his master saves him. When I preach your glory as an unseen god, they call me Christian (a heretic). He prays for the end of misery and suffering of the people and for a new age that is Satya yuga or the age of Truth. (StutiChintamani, 20 Boli.)

Every time

They dare mock me

Bhima the lowly kandha (TandraPatnaik, God as Sunya, p. 137)

He proudly referred to himself as Bhima- the ‘Kandha’ in many of the colophons of his poems. He still fervently wished to change the attitude of the people towards admitting the caste discrimination.

‘There are thirty six types of class

Fifty two sub-castes.

Do not make any discrimination

Just take refuge in the name of the lord’

Again he implores that if at all one likes to talk of jati, then truly speaking there can be but two such classes—

‘Behold the pair of forms

Created by lord-

Male and female.

These two jati apart,

O wise souls know for sure,

There is no third jati

To speak of’ (StutiChintamani, 70)

BhimaBhoi's concern for the society and the suffering humanity as if comes from the deep recesses of a sensitive heart. This love has not stemmed from the theoretical concern but from the innermost corner of his heart. Degeneration of values and corruptsocial practices deeply moved him. His frustration and anger stems from this concern.

So he implores the almighty,

Whoever you may be,

Please save your world.

In the age of kali.
Bhima the kandha
Pleads to save the world. (Bhajanmala, 1. 17)

BhimaBhoi's concern for the suffering humanity pours forth so spontaneously that one rarely comes across such an embodiment of karuna. This quotation is the some portions from the 26th canto of his StutiChintamani to vindicate the points.

'I have no hope
No one to rely on.
My courage fails me.
What do I do?
O Lord look after this
World of yours.

How can I
Keep myself aloof
From the limitless woe
Of all living beings.
O Lord set them free
From all the misery.
In their stead may I suffer
The hell forever.

A bone or two
A drop of blood, and a lump of flesh-
I carry such a frame
Mortal and frail.
How will I
Then not grieve over
The ceaseless sorrow
Of all living beings

Conclusion

The whole discussion concisely deals with the religious tradition of Odisha, is created around the conception of God as Sunya-Brahman and is remarkable for its stance towards religion, man and society. Again it talks about the persona of BhimaBhoi as a poet and a philosopher and his contested status in the society.

The man under no circumstances can be segregated from the universe, from the society and from the divine. The very Supreme Reality and all that emanate from it are non-different. Naturally, non-difference/equality (Samata) is the keyword. So it is logically follows that human being self-conscious creatures not only treat every being equally but feels one with every aspect of the creation. This sense of equality leads humans to a sense of compassion for one and all.

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